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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the current debate over the Regular Education Initiative within the field of special education. The views of both proponents and opponents are summarized. The paper then identifies five ethical issues and value conflicts which have been largely ignored by both sides and discusses them in the context of the Regular Education Initiative. Issues include: (1) advocacy dilemmas; (2) value differences related to the purposes of education; (3) eligibility criteria for special education services which appear to exclude many at-risk students in need of intervention; (4) excellence versus equity issues; and (5) the impact of educational reform upon at-risk students. It is concluded that the debate can aid in dealing with the economic, social, and educational policies, practices, and priorities which are currently obstacles in fulfilling a real commitment to children in today's society. (Author/DB)

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Ethical Issues and Value Conflicts in Our Public Schools: A Critical Aspect of the Regular Education Initiative

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Abstract

The Regular Education Initiative (REI) debate currently is receiving a great deal of attention in the special education literature. It is suggested, however, that there are several ethical issues and value conflicts which are being ignored in this contemporary discourse. These include: (1) advocacy dilemmas, (2) value differences related to the purposes of education, (3) eligibility criteria for special education services which appear to exclude many students in need of intervention -- which students are at-risk and why; (4) excellence vs. equity issues, and (5) the impact of educational reform upon at-risk students. Each of these issues is discussed in light of the Regular Education Initiative.

Ethical Issues and Value Conflicts in Our Public Schools
A Critical Aspect of the Regular Education Initiative

The Regular Education Initiative (REI) debate currently is receiving a great deal of attention in the special education literature (Davis, 1989; Gerber, 1988; Greer, 1988; Kauffman, Gerber, & Semmel; 1988; Lilly, 1988, 1989; Reynolds, Wang & Walberg, 1987; Skrtic, 1987, 1988; Vergason & Anderegg, 1989). The results of this discourse are likely to have a significant impact upon our public schools' service delivery system to handicapped and other special needs students (e.g., Chapter I, migrant, multicultural etc.).

By far, the most vocal group in the REI debate has been a core of special education professors and researchers. In fact, some observers have claimed that this "debate" has largely been a discourse conducted exclusively among special educators within institutions of higher education -- with little, if any, participation in such by regular educators (Lieberman, 1985; Vergason & Anderegg, 1989). Therefore,they argue that the title, "Regular Education Initiative" is misleading and inappropriate and should more appropriately be called the "Special Education Initiative".

The REI debate is a very complex and multifaceted issue. As commonly viewed, proponents of the REI are calling for a thorough review and examination of the current system employed in American public education to identify, instruct, and place students who are either judged to be handicapped, or who are viewed as requiring some type of remedial or compensatory services. They contend that the present dual system (one for special education students and another for regular education students) requires major restructuring. They argue that the current system employed

by special educators to identify, instruct, and place students is essentially flawed, based upon some faulty assumptions, and is largely ineffective both programmatically and fiscally (Lilly, 1988, 1989, Stainback & Stainback, 1984; Reynolds, Wang, and Walberg, 1987). In brief, what is being called for is a critical examination of past and present special education policies and practices, along with a restructuring of our public education system, so that all students, both handicapped and nonhandicapped, can be better served.

Opponents of the REI, although usually in general agreement with many aspects of its overall goals, raise concerns and questions relative to both its soundness and achievability at this point in time. They argue that most proponents have not given careful enough consideration to the potentially dangerous implications of the REI for special needs students. They contend that current special education policies and practices are essentially sound -- and if abandoned, many handicapped students could suffer irreparable harm. Opponents argue that most special education policies and practices have come about because of deficiencies and inequities which exist within regular education -- and it makes little sense to place handicapped students back into this very system, one which has not sufficiently demonstrated its willingness or capability to adequately serve these students (Gerber, 1988; Hallahan, Keller, McKinney, Lloyd, & Bryan, 1988; Kauffman, Gerber, & Semmel, 1988; Keogh, 1988).

Critical, to the REI controversy are certain ethical issues and value conflicts which have largely been ignored in this debate. Arguably, many students are being inadequately served by their current school programs not only because their instructional needs may be somewhat different from the majority of their peers, but also because they possess diverse value systems. In brief, they perceive of themselves, or are viewed by others,

e.g., teachers and administrators, as not conforming to the norms of "their school environment." These are the students who may not qualify for special education programming services under present eligibility criteria but who are widely recognized as "falling through the cracks" of our educational system.

Advocacy Dilemmas

First, there are a large group of ethical issues and related value conflicts surrounding advocacy dilemmas involved in the REI. For example, many special educators at the LEA level understandably feel that they may be abrogating their advocacy role and responsibilities for handicapped students under the REI. They feel that they are "selling out". They also may be interpreting the REI movement as casting a negative light upon what they have been doing professionally -- some, for many years. The message that they may be receiving is: "What I have been doing (special education practices) as well as the underlying foundation for such (special education policy) has not only been unnecessary or incorrect, but also, in fact, may have been very harmful to my students".

The field of special education has always had a very strong student advocacy base. Many special educators currently are experiencing a great deal of frustration and confusion. They feel that they are being asked to hold two views at the same time -- views which they judge to be in opposition to one another: advocating for student placement in a system (regular education) which they basically distrust. I suspect that there is considerable cognitive dissonance in this process.

Purpose of Education

Second, there presently exist wide differences of opinion and some major value differences regarding the very definition of education. What

are the purposes of schooling per se? Clearly, the recent increased concern throughout the country for at-risk students focuses on this basic problem. The REI debate touches at the heart of this issue. Is the sole purpose of education to teach academics? Or, are the goals of education much broader and include socialization, mental and physical health, vocational, and family issues? Does public education have any responsibilities for dealing with basic human needs issues such as shelter, hunger, poverty, family planning, etc? Certainly, there is wide disagreement on these issues. In brief -- how one defines the very purposes of schooling will to a large extent shape his or her views relative to the REI. It appears as though this particular issue has been largely ignored thus far in the REI discourse.

Which Students Are At-Risk and Why

Third, there are several ethical issues and value conflicts related to determining specifically "which students are at-risk and why". Many educators, as well as parents, frequently are concerned about students who are denied entry into special education programs because they have been judged to not meet the necessary eligibility criteria. Yet, these students often are denied any services even though they are widely recognized as requiring special interventions and supports.

The following types of students represent a small sample of those who are suggested as falling within this category: (1) students who have problems with low self-esteem or inappropriate socialization skills but who are declared ineligible for special education services because it was determined that such behaviors are not adversely affecting educational performance; (2) students whose IQ scores fall just one point or two above that which has been determined to be necessary for classification within the category of mental retardation -- and therefore, they are denied

individualized programming services, and (3) students who simply do not "fit the mold" -- those students whose values do not conform to the majority of their peers or teachers. They may be regarded as "misfits" within the system. They are often referred to as "Geeks" or "Dorks". Gay and lesbian students often find themselves in this category. Yet, it should be recognized that the values of these students may be quite different, and because of this, they are at-risk of being ignored educationally, or worse, made to feel that they are useless and devalued.

Our current special education system appears to give the message that you must first fail before you can be helped -- or, you may have severe, debilitating emotional or behavioral problems but unless you first fail academically, we cannot help you. Conversely, many argue that special education has taken the blame unduly with respect to this issue. Without special education programs and services, it is argued, these students would go largely ignored anyway within the regular education system. At least special education has made a serious effort to intervene in behalf of those students who appear to be most in need of help. The REI debate focuses on this very important issue of determining responsibility. Who should be responsible for dealing with students judged to be at-risk? Regular education? Special education? Is this even the right question to be asked? Possibly a more appropriate question would be: "Does there exist in today's society a real commitment to children -- <u>all children</u>? And, if not -- where are our priorities? and what are our real values?

<u>Excellence vs. Equity Issues</u>

Fourth, the REI debate deals with the "excellence vs. equity" issue. The REI discourse has called attention to "pressure points" at the interface or regular and special education. In doing so, it has raised the question of

whether we need a deeper understanding (a new paradigm or operational definition) of equity in education. The question becomes all the more critical when one considers the current pressure for excellence and its possible incompatibility with the movement toward equity.

For example, special educators have long relied on traditional pull-out models for the delivery of services. Many REI proponents have not only questioned the efficacy of these programs but also the morality of them as well. The concept of "separate but equal" was rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court (Brown v. Board, 1954), but it continues to dominate our special education practice. We most always separate special education students from their peers in order to implement their individualized programs. However, does this practice need to be so? Does this practice run counter to the ethics of our own profession (Davis & McCaul, 1988).

Also, the movement toward accountability and higher standards in American public education has put considerable pressure on regular classroom teachers. They are clearly feeling the demands of adhering to more rigorous standards and increasing their students' achievement on standardized tests. Are the REI proponents, therefore, being realistic in promoting more mainstreaming of handicapped students? Can classroom teachers meet the demands of both masters: excellence and equity? (Davis & McCaul, 1988).

At the core of all equity issues is our overriding societal attitude toward diversity. Freedom of speech and acceptance of a variety of viewpoints is clearly central to our conception of democracy. Still, many would argue that subtle and pervasive pressures toward conformity exist and that educational institutions reflect and even amplify these pressures. Underlying the REI debate is, of course, an attempt to expand our tolerance

and acceptance of "minorities" and to change attitudes toward the "handicapped." Seen in this light, it is clearly an extension of the civil rights and advocacy movement. But, is it a movement of limited scope and support? (Davis & McCaul, 1988).

Impact of Educational Reform Upon At-Risk Students

Fifth, there exist several ethical issues and value conflicts surrounding the educational reform agendas. Essentially, the major question to be asked is: "Educational reform for whom?" Many advocates of the REI are calling for a major restructuring of our general education system. Yet, others would argue that our present system, despite its recognized problems, serves the majority of students quite well. Is reform necessary if only the bottom quartile of students are considered to be at risk? Then again, still others would offer a rebuttal that far more than 25% of our students are at-risk -- that our present system serves only a very few students adequately.

Depending upon one's view of "who is at risk" and "how many of these students are at risk" the REI debate will likely have very different levels of impact. The point is that the REI cannot be considered in isolation from other larger debates which are currently taking place in America -- not only within education but within other disciplines as well. Issues which are involved in these broader societal debates (e.g., homeless children, child abuse, chemical abuse, hunger, poverty, unemployment, etc.) often are directly related to the REI agenda. It must be recognized that the REI is much broader than a debate about educational issues and concerns. It is rooted in political, economic, and sociological thought and action (Davis, 1989; Skrtic, 1988).

Summary

In summary -- The REI debate, if it is properly focused and sufficiently broad to include the voices of not just special educators but all individuals who are interested in improving the learning and living conditions of children and youth, has the potential of having a strong positive impact. It provides us with a rare opportunity to view children -- not just handicapped children, but all children -- from a broad perspective. Yet, first, we must establish our priorities and recognize the value conflicts which serve to impede progress toward reaching this goal. Professional egos cannot be allowed to get in the way of progress. The debate must move from the professional literature to the real world. The larger questions must be asked, with probably the most critical being, "Is there a real commitment to children in today's society?". And if we conclude that there isn't -- then we must act to change those political, economic, social, and educational policies, practices, and priorities which serve as obstacles to fully meeting this commitment.

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